The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Elizabeth Renker by Jolie Braun
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JB: My name is Jolie Braun and I'm the Curator of Modern Literature and Manuscripts at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. I'm conducting this interview via Zoom with Ohio State University English Professor Elizabeth Renker on Monday, July 27, 2020. We'll be discussing her work on nineteenth-century poet Sarah Piatt. During her lifetime, Piatt's poetry was published in periodicals and newspapers and widely read but fell into obscurity after her death in 1919. Her work remained unknown until the 1990s, when scholars such as Dr. Renker began to rediscover her and reassess her work. So, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today, Elizabeth. Before we talk about Sarah Piatt, I'd like to start with your background. Can you talk a bit about your education, your scholarly training, and your early research interests?

ER: Oh, sure. Well, I was an English major, which is something I usually discuss with my English major students, and had an interest in poetry, dating back to when I was an undergraduate. When I finally decided to go to graduate school, I initially thought I wanted to work in twentieth-century American modernism, especially Wallace Stevens. But when I started my PhD program at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, I very quickly got pulled into the nineteenth century, and retained my interest in poetry, but basically moved back a century. And another super important thing that happened when I was in graduate school, in terms of my scholarly and intellectual development, was that I got training outside the English Department also in the Department of History at Johns Hopkins, specifically in nineteenth-century American social history. Now, I started grad school in 1986, and at that time one of the huge changes in the study of American history at the time was a shift from a focus on political history to the idea of social history, which, I always tell my students, basically what this means is, like, the history of everyday people and everyday life, and I thought it was exhilarating. So, I really combined my training in history with my training in nineteenth-century American literature, and that was what led me to develop the projects that I've been working on ever since.

JB: So, it wasn't 'til a bit later that you discovered Sarah Piatt, is that right?

ER: That's correct.

JB: I was hoping you could talk a bit about how and when that came about.

ER: Sure. Yeah. Okay, so, the longer version of the story is that I wrote a dissertation about Herman Melville. And eventually, that became my first book, which was about Melville's career. And most of the book focused on Melville's fiction, but it concluded with a chapter about his poems, which at the time were very little known, very obscure works. They're still really pretty

obscure, but they're getting more attention, now in particular, because he wrote a lot about the Civil War. But, one of the lingering effects of having started my career as a Melville scholar is that I became fascinated with what I will describe briefly as the process by which authors become great. So, I had done a lot of work on what Melville scholars called the "Melville revival" and this is the point in history—now we go back to social history—the point in history when American culture first started to identify Herman Melville as a quote unquote "great writer." And, you know, my students are usually pretty surprised to hear that when Melville died in 1891, he died in obscurity. He was basically an unknown writer at that time. People might have heard of him for having written early bestsellers when he was a young man in the late 1840s. But, you know, *Moby Dick* was not recognized in his lifetime as a classic or a great book, the way it is now. So, calling attention to the historical process by which these things happen became a fascination of mine. And another reason I like to talk about Melville when I talk about Piatt is because I see a lot of parallels between what happened with his career and what I have been involved with for the past 20 years in recovering Piatt. Another point of connection there that I just derive some pleasure from is that Sarah Piatt, the centennial of her death, is something that we observed this year. She was born in 1836 and died in 1919, and Melville was born in 1819, so the centennial, a Melville [bi]centennial and a Piatt centennial, both happened last year in 2019. You know, these brought my two main people together again.

But when I talk to audiences and students about Sarah Piatt, and I always get so many people who say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I've never heard of her," and I say, "There's no reason to apologize." I mean, you have to realize no writer is born great. It's not like a baby is born, and people are like, "That's Shakespeare, that person will affect the ages." You know, they have to become great somehow. And that means there's a social process and a cultural process. So, you know, I started out my career working on Melville, but as I mentioned earlier, I always had an interest in poetry. So, after my book on Melville came out, I moved a little bit further away from fiction and more toward poetry and started working on a poetry book. And there was a time, you mentioned this in your introductory remarks, around the mid-90s, when Sarah Piatt's name started to crop up in a couple places. So, this was right around the time my Melville book was published, 1996. And I was working up my new material toward a book on poetry. And what happened at the time is that two different scholars who don't work together—they're not in the same scholarly circles—but two different well-regarded, well-known scholars, right around the same time, named Sarah Piatt as what they were calling the great undiscovered major poet of the American nineteenth century.

And one of them was Paula Bennett, who published an essay in 1995 on women poets between 1860 and 1900. She included a couple of Sarah's poems in that essay and also made this claim for Sarah. And a paperback Penguin edition of nineteenth-century American poets came out, and there were a couple of interesting things about that book. It was a classroom anthology, so there weren't extensive selections, and also, it's, you know, it's supposed to be a relatively accessibly priced textbook, so you can only fit so many people. But that Penguin edition had two editors. One of them was William Spengemann, who was a senior scholar of American literature, very well-known, also a Melville scholar. But the other one was an undergraduate student of his named Jess Roberts, Jessica Forbes Roberts. She publishes under some different

names. But, so, Professor Spengemann and his student produced this. And so, it was really super interesting that part of this book was related to undergraduate research that he had done with this student of his. But the introduction to their Penguin also said Sarah Piatt was the great undiscovered poet of the nineteenth century. It was a big claim to make.

So, that came out in ‘96, Paula's essay came out in ‘95, and when I had an opportunity to teach a graduate seminar specifically on nineteenth-century American poetry a few years later, I put onto the syllabus the fact that we were going to assess this claim. I said, “This is a big claim in a scholarly field.” And at that point I hadn’t read a lot of Piatt. I had read a little, you know, snippets of things quoted in the articles. But preparing for that class, which was—I looked it up before our interview—I taught that class in the summer of 2000. Which is kind of nice, because it’s exactly 20 years ago to the time of this conversation. That was the first time I sat down and started reading Sarah’s poems with focus and attention. And as soon as I undertook paying attention to reading her, I instantly connected with what they were saying, which is really kind of interesting. And my students often say, “Well, you know, how could it be instant? How on earth could you just read a poet and instantly say, like—and I have to say them, well, one of the ways to understand that and why I felt that way, and why these other people who are inside the world of poetry felt that way, is because we’ve all read a ton of poetry. So there was something about, it’s almost like if you were a musician and you listen to some particular work, musical work, and a lot of people who kind of know how that craft works could recognize things about it immediately, maybe that other people would need some help seeing.

But I definitely saw what they were seeing, I mean, the voice—that’s a term we use in poetry to talk about, you know, how do words on a page create the effect that someone is talking to you. The voice was just stunning, and my students and I had a very interesting unit on Piatt, assessing these poems that we were all reading for the first time and these claims about her. And, you know, I have never looked back, because ever since teaching that class in the summer of 2000, I have taught Sarah almost every year to undergraduates or graduate students. Whenever I have a class that she fits into, a poetry class or a class on that period in American history, I always teach her. My student evaluations at the end of the semester always ask students what their favorite reading was or their favorite author, and most of the time, in most of the classes I have taught, they pick Piatt. So there is something about her voice that is speaking to people now and it creates a tremendous amount of energy about the recovery.

She had one kind of reception in her own life, as you mentioned. She was a celebrity poet. She was famous during her lifetime and then fell into obscurity. People hear her voice now in a different way. She’s an extremely ironic poet, which a lot of people missed in her lifetime. She was a woman poet. There were a lot of strictures on what women could say acceptably in print. She was very savvy and very canny about how she put things in her poetic language. But for the people who had the ability to see it, you can see there’s a tremendous amount of irony in the poems. We live in such an ironic age now, irony is a default mode many of us grow up with, especially younger people, college-age people, and they absolutely adore her irony. So, this is a time for her, and it’s just been really exciting. It’s been really exciting watching it happen and having a chance to contribute to it and working with all my amazing colleagues at The Ohio

State University Libraries who are helping to build the resources that can bring her to a broader world.

JB: So I'd love to ask a follow-up question based on something you just said. It sounds like you first encountered Sarah Piatt through scholarship written about her, and then that prompted you to seek out her poetry. I'd love to know a little bit about what were the first poems you read that really jumped out at you with having this "voice," as you say. And I'm also curious to know, where did you find the works? You mentioned the Penguin anthology and that part of the challenge in the '90s was that her work was still out of print and difficult to obtain, from what I understand, so I'm also curious to know how you began to find and access her writing.

ER: Okay, yeah, good, good question, because that's something we definitely—those of us who work on Piatt and would like to bring her to broader attention—we face that challenge even today. And there are different issues for us because we work at a time when, more and more, the culture of American colleges has turned against buying textbooks, and so all kinds of issues come up about how to give people access, and that's something, if we have a chance in a few minutes to talk about the digital projects that I've been working on with the Ohio State University Libraries, that will be a good way for us to return to that topic. It just so happens I pulled off my bookshelf that Penguin edition I was mentioning, because in that very first grad class I taught in Summer 2000, this was the book that was available to me. If I—students still did buy textbooks then—and if I wanted to order a textbook, this was the one I had. So, there are a couple of important things to say about that. One is that the really transformative moment for studying Piatt in more depth and having more access to her poems was to come to pass the next year. That's when Paula Bernat Bennett published her selected edition of Sarah's poems, which is called *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*. So, that was published in 2001. Since 2001, that has been the standard edition of Piatt poems. It is also available in paperback, so when I teach Sarah, I order the paperback edition of *Palace-Burner*. But, prior to that, if you wanted some sort of collection of Piatt's work, you had the Spengemann edition. And then the other thing I should mention is that in 1999 another player entered the scene, and that is Larry R. Michaels, who is a fellow Ohioan, and he published another selected edition of Sarah's poems called *That New World*, which is a quotation from a volume title of Sarah's. But Larry published his selected edition through a smaller press, so it was not as easy to acquire or even as easy to discover as Paula Bennett's edition, which came out of a university press, University of Illinois. But that gives you a sense of, you know, again, I've mentioned William Spengemann and Jessica Roberts, Larry Michaels, Paula Bennett. All these things are happening in the late '90s. And the story I like to use with my undergraduates, they'll say, like, "Well, why? What happened?"

I say, well, this is one of the interesting things about it. The historical analogy I like to use is the discovery of the calculus, which history of mathematics always says was independently discovered by Newton and Leibniz at the same time. So, you know, I sort of feel like that's kind of what happened with Piatt. It's just there was there was a larger zeitgeist at the time to recover women writers who had been ignored for such a long time in the canon. And so there had been a lot of energy since about the 1970s, especially gaining steam in the '80s, to go back

into the historical record and engage in this work called recovering women writers. And something about the trajectory of that project was such that you had numerous people at the same time saying, “Yep, women writers are important. They’ve been neglected. It was wrong. We’ve got to fix it.” But people homing in on Sarah Piatt and saying, “This is one of the greats,” which is an incredible story, and it’s exciting. So, I pulled out my Spengemann paperback here, my Penguin paperback, because these would have been the poems I was assigning to my graduate students that very first summer. And the very first one—this is another interesting part of the story—the first one in the Piatt section is “The Palace-Burner.” Now, you might have noticed a minute ago I said that’s the title of Paula Bennett's selected edition. They both, also independently of one another, they both selected this poem as a lead poem. And because it was the first one in Spengemann’s edition, it was the first one I read when I was preparing that class. And so, sometimes I say when I talk about Sarah to public audiences—and it’s a true story—when I sat down to prepare that class, I read the first line of the first poem, and I said out loud, “Oh my god.” Because Sarah’s voice had me in one line. And people say, “Well, what was the line?”

JB: [laughs] Exactly what I was going to ask.

ER: “She has been burning palaces” is the first line. So it’s interesting I had that response to that poem, but these two other people had independently picked that poem, right? So, in poetry studies what we might say about that is, at least at this point in time, the poem called “The Palace-Burner” is Sarah’s signature poem. And what we mean by that in literary studies is we just mean, like, this is a poem by which this poet will be known. That could shift as more people come to learn about Sarah, but for now I would say “The Palace-Burner” is her signature poem. And there are all kinds of reasons it’s important. I mean, like I said, she had me at the first line, just because it’s an absolutely stunning line, it’s—and again this goes back to, well, what do you mean when you say that? Okay, if you’re inside poetry and you’ve read a lot of poems and so on, there are a lot of things you hear in that line. And, that poem—apart from its poetic beauties, let’s say, its force—notice the first line: you don’t know what's going on. This is one of Sarah’s typical methods in poems. “She has been burning palaces.” You read the first line. Well, who is “she”? I have no idea. What does it mean that she’s burning palaces? I don’t know, we live in the United States, there are no palaces here. Okay, so the poem leads, it’s got a beautiful rhythm, but it’s got a great image: burning palaces. And also, at some level, it makes no sense. Now, it’s very important for people who want to read Sarah’s work to also understand that when the poems have that effect, when you read it and you’re like, I don’t know what’s going on, it’s not you. She writes it that way. She writes it that way: it provokes your brain. You start thinking. You have a response. Your brain wants to know more, it wants to figure things out, but you can’t figure them out until you read the rest of the poem. And by the time you finish the poem, you will have figured out a few things, but not all of them. She is a classic type of poet: there are poets who work this way and poets who do not, but she is one who does. She writes in such a way that you cannot understand most of the poems by reading them once. This is what I mean about the way they capture you and pull you in. There are always puzzles in her poems. For example, she’s always using these pronouns where you don’t know what she’s talking about. “She has been burning palaces.” Well, “she” who? She does this all the time, and

I say to my students, “It’s not you, it’s one of the ways she sets up the puzzle.” And it means you have to go deeply into the poem. You have to read it carefully, you can’t breeze through these or skim them or you won’t have any idea what’s going on.

But, “She has been burning palaces.” Okay, so this poem was published—this goes back to your question about where would you find Piatt’s poems, how would you read them. This one, in her lifetime, was published in a periodical called *The Independent* and it was published in 1872. And, you know, for a long time, across the twentieth century, there was a kind of a dominant way of thinking about poetry—it was also true in the nineteenth century—that it was supposed to be about a higher, better world than the gritty world of realities that we live in—that somehow it was elevated above everyday life into a more transcendental plane, it was about truth and beauty and so on. This is a very, very misleading way to think about poems. Some of them do care about those things. But an awful lot of them don’t; and poems are embedded in their own social worlds. So, one of the coolest things about “The Palace-Burner” and the fact that it led Piatt studies as the signature poem, and it was one that early on I taught over and over again, is that American students, and American people, including me, had no idea about the context for this poem. At the time, it just wasn’t taught. Nobody knew this. It was news to me. I mean, I’m an educated person, I went to high school and college and graduate school. I had never heard of something in the history of France called the Paris Commune. I had no idea that Communards had overtaken the city of Paris and burned the palace down. I never learned that, did you learn that?

JB: [laughs] No.

ER: You know, I never learned it. Okay, so this actually happened. And this was a huge historical event. And yes, it happened in Paris, but it was a huge historical event for Americans. It was in all the newspapers. It was a trending topic of the time, everybody cared about it, more unrest in France, you know, the land of the French Revolution. And there were discussions and depictions in the form of illustrations in American periodicals of the communist rebels in Paris, including women and children, being executed after the city was retaken. So, you know, the poem teaches great for a lot of reasons. Great poem, it’s puzzling, you have to take it apart and engage with it to understand it, but it also opens up this whole history, not only world history but American history, about events in France. And it’s a good example of how Piatt, you know, even though at the time she was basically living at home, raising her children as a married woman, but also writing poems when she could. She wrote a lot of poems for somebody who was busy with kids all day. How engaged she was with the outside world, and the very complex bonds that she creates in that poem between herself as kind of a protected American woman in the domestic sphere with a woman whose picture she sees in the newspaper who is facing bayonets and is about to be executed for her rebel activities. So, in one of the first undergraduate classes where I taught this poem, I had a student, I remember, who was a double-major in English and French. And she looked at me and she said, “Did this happen in France?” And I said, “Yes.” And she instantly said, “Now I have an honors thesis topic.” And, not only that, but that year she won the university-wide research prize at Ohio State for her essay

on Sarah Piatt, “The Palace Burner,” and American media images of the communards. So anyway, Piatt just electrifies classrooms that way.

Did I answer your question? Okay, so where would we find Piatt poems. All right, so at that time, we needed to use the few available textbooks, like the Penguin edition. Then, Bennett’s selected edition came out, we have the Michaels selected edition. But going back to your question about classrooms today, we can order a paperback copy of the Bennett edition. The Bennett edition, however, is also partial, it’s a selected edition. And one of the things that people want to understand about that, is that means Piatt has written far more poems than appear in Bennett’s edition. So one of the things that, as you know, Jolie, I’ve been working on with The Ohio State University Libraries, is making available free to the public, digital versions of poems that do not exist in print anywhere today. They were published in the newspapers and magazines of their time when Sarah was a celebrity poet, but they were not collected, say, in Bennett’s edition or Larry’s edition or Spengemann’s edition. We don’t know exactly how many poems Sarah wrote. We’re still discovering new poems, literally, every year, but we know she wrote at least 600 poems. And only a fraction of them were in Paula’s edition. So, we’re building these websites, little by little, where we can pull the poems out of the 19th century publications they appeared in. They’re in the public domain now, so we can make images of those newspaper pages or magazine pages and texts of the poems available free to the public, and that’s a project we’ve really been building in recent years.

JB: I’d like to go back to the earlier discussion about recovery. And you’ve talked a little bit about the various aspects that go into this sort of larger project, such as anthologies, digital projects, making the poet’s work more widely available and accessible, teaching in the classroom. But I’d like to hear you say a bit more about what else needs to happen and how that brings a forgotten writer, such as Piatt, back into, if not the mainstream, sort of a larger conversation of being read and thought about.

ER: Well, that’s a very important question and an interesting question, in part because the changes in higher education are now moving at such a rapid pace. You know, I’ve been teaching at Ohio State 29 years as of this September, and higher education has always been you know, changing in one way or another. But I can say in terms of my career, the changes in the past 10 years have been very quick. Things are changing faster, and in the past five years, it’s been even faster, and now with the pandemic lots of other things are getting overturned. So, we are dealing with really a very new world in which to think about things like people reading, people studying, how do people relate to knowledge and entertainment, what’s our role as teachers, and so on.

So, you’ll remember I said I started out my career working on Melville, and another reason that I often talk about Melville and Piatt alongside of each other is because Melville was first identified as a great writer basically in the 1920s, the period we call the “Melville revival,” and then he became a global phenomenon during and after World War II. But this was a time when higher education, when scholarship, received a tremendous amount of funding, state and federal funding, and there was money to do things like create standard editions of, you know,

every work the author ever created. There was funding for the humanities to undertake projects like this, and that kind of funding has mostly vanished. Current conditions in higher education are such that the number of English majors is dropping dramatically. I talked about the last five years; the numbers drop dramatically every single year. So, we really are facing a new world in which to think about things like how do we bring someone like Sarah—and again, my experience teaching undergraduates at Ohio State who represent a pretty broad cross-section of a college student population and they love her, and they respond to her, and they find her valuable to read and think about. But, you know, the ways that we bring an author to attention now have to change. It's not going to be because we can rely, as we could with Melville, on the fact that we were going to have so many students in classrooms and we could assign these authors and talk about why they were interesting and important and basically create a cultural canon through the classroom.

We only have a limited means for doing that now. So, you know, one of my own views about what's going to happen with Sarah: I know that once she reaches people, she reaches people. But the question of how we reach them now is really changing and that's been, as you know in our many mutual projects at the Library, that's been one of the projects we've been working on, bringing Sarah to the public. It's why The Ohio State University Libraries project that we've been working on—which we've called the Sarah Piatt Recovery Project—it has a number of different sub-projects attached to it. But overall, you can hear the whole ethos behind that is to make available to the public—not just to students at Ohio State—make available to the general public resources for reading, understanding, and pursuing interests in Sarah Piatt and her work. So, this is an alternative, by creating free public humanities sites—you know, you don't need a password to get into these. A lot of the kinds of scholarly resources that you might want to access through a university library, for example, you can't get in unless you have a password. You don't have a password unless you're a student or faculty or staff. This is not true, our projects are open to everyone. So, by making these resources available, we're hoping to find a means that suits the current moment to get Piatt out there and give people access to her. Now, the other more complicated question is if people are not learning about her through the classroom, how are they going to hear about her, since still, she's relatively unknown. So, you know, if you search her on the web, you can see, and those of us who have been watching this for a number of years have been able to see, that she's gradually acquiring followers. How that happens is beyond me to trace, but I would love to know if anyone listening to this interview [laughs] has some ideas to email me with. I would like to know how we could better get the word out about her poems, so that more people would think to read her—people who are not necessarily, say, taking a class with me.

JB: Well, in addition to the scholarly writing you've done, you've also given many talks at history centers and historical societies, so I assume that you see this as playing an important part in that larger recovery project?

ER: Yeah, I absolutely think that, I think that Sarah needs and will speak to a general public. I know that giving lots of public talks and talking about her life and her poems and so on, audiences really pretty—connect with her pretty intensely, even if they've come to one of my

public talks and they've never heard of her before. They find it very interesting. But of course, even giving lots of talks at historical societies or local history groups or whatever, I'm only reaching a certain number of people. So there's a bigger question about how to reach more people, and I just think that's one of the ongoing, one of the ongoing issues that the recovery project is going to be trying to address is how do we get the word out, how do we get the poems out. I know that Stephanie Burt, poetry scholar at Harvard, in recent interviews, you know, having just published a recent book of her own about American poetry was asked, you know, "Are there any poets you think people should know about?" And Stephanie said, "Sarah Piatt." So, we need more of that kind of getting the word out.

JB: So I want to go back to, you had mentioned that the recovery of Sarah was part of this larger thing happening in the 1990s of recovering women writers, and I know that you and I have talked in the last few months about seeing a resurgence of this happening right now, and people being very interested in recovering women writers. And I think I've noticed predominantly that's focused on more modern writers, and usually writers of fiction. I'm curious to know if you think it makes it more complicated that she's a poet, that she's nineteenth century. You were talking about how she writes these really complicated poems that require sustained and multiple readings and are really rewarding, but that almost suggests that it could be less immediately accessible than what you would hope for reaching a broad audience.

ER: Well, I think there are two parts of that question I'd like to respond to first. One is that—I'll start with the second one—which is the depth and complexities of her poems. Remember I said she's written many hundreds of poems, at least 600. We don't have an accurate count now. But she also writes in a number of different styles. So, there are some poems where you read them once and you say, as I said earlier, "I don't know what's going on." But there are other poems, you read and you're like, "Yep, I totally get that." And those poems also are usually deeper. But one of the things that there is consensus about in Piatt studies is that she was very skilled in writing on two levels. She could write a poem that, again, someone reading the newspaper or reading the magazine, could read quickly, which is how one reads those kinds of publications, typically. Pretty fast. She knew that. So, she definitely has, she writes a lot of poems that you could read quickly and understand and get satisfaction from. Now, those poems, usually, if you go back to them and you start reading more deeply, you will see another layer. So, one of the reasons that she managed—even though she's such a complex poet—one of the reasons she managed to be a celebrity poet in her lifetime, was because she wasn't Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot. You know, they're famous for writing in a deliberately obscure, difficult manner, they felt that poetry had to be difficult to be good. That wasn't true for Piatt. She was publishing, you know, widely in her own day, as we've said, in magazines, newspapers, volumes. She had a lot of readers who read once and got satisfaction from the poems, but she rewards this second layer of reading. So, it's a particular skill, what she does, that she can write on two levels at once. Now, to go back to my previous topic of Herman Melville. Melville himself recognized that this was one of the skills, I'll call it—he might have called it a trick—it was one of the skills for being able to survive as a writer in nineteenth-century America. He called it, quote, writing both ways. That was his phrase. And what he meant by that was, I can

write for an audience that's going to buy my stuff, and they'll understand it, but both ways to him meant: at the same time, I'm going to write on a much deeper level. Melville, at a certain point, said he was unwilling to do that. Okay, Sarah did it for her whole career. So, the poems don't have to be scrutinized, and you don't have to spend tons of time on them. If you're somebody who loves poetry and is interested in getting into the depths of poetry, they're very rewarding. But it's really not necessary. So, if I gave that impression earlier, that would not be accurate, except as I said, there are some poems that are so complicated that you'll read them and say, "I have no idea what's going on." So, let's see. That was the second part of your question, I'm trying to remember the first part, Jolie. Do you remember? I went on kind of a digression there and I can't recall the first thing you asked me.

JB: Oh no, it was great.

ER: Recovering women writers, right? It was recovering women writers. Yes.

JB: Yes.

ER: So like, you—I think you have put, I think you've identified something extremely important, which is, you said, does it matter that she's a poet. And the answer to that, I think, is yes. I think we live in an age when people in general have an understanding that, and I hear this from people all the time, they say things to me like, quote, "I don't understand poetry," quote, "I don't get poetry." There is a kind of a general cultural understanding right now that poetry is not for people who are not specialists or who don't live in some sort of ethereal world. And these are misunderstandings. I understand why people feel those ways because that's part of the current rap on what poetry is. Now, please notice I just used the word "rap." And so, the other point I want to make here is, people are steeped in poetry in our culture because song lyrics are poetry. Rap is probably *the* most important form of poetry we have had in our society for the past several decades, rap and its affiliated musical forms. These are forms of poetry. So—and there's no contest about that. If anyone wanted to say to me, "Rap is not poetry," they would just be wrong, I mean, factually, because song lyrics have been a form of poetry dating back at least to the Renaissance. You can see in print people saying, "Here are poems for you to use as song lyrics." You know, it's—everybody in poetry knows that. Song lyrics are poems. So, it's kind of, it's a little bit culturally, it's a spot of misunderstanding in our culture when people say, "I don't get poetry. I don't like poetry," because they probably get in their cars and listen to music and sing along, and that's a poetic activity. But, because there is this misunderstanding about what poetry is, I think it does make it harder to convey to a general audience that they should care about a poet. Not that anybody "should" do anything, but that she might be of interest to them, that they might enjoy her work and so on. But I agree with what you've been saying, that the energy around recovering women who were otherwise lost to history is only gaining energy. I mean, that is, that's a very important movement still. And just recently, you know, for example, there have been numerous books covered in *The New York Times* about recovering lost women. And I think there's a lot of energy around that. So—

JB: Well, even—

ER: Yeah, go on, I'm sorry.

JB: Well, you mentioned *The New York Times*. They—I'm sure you're familiar with—that feature they just started in the last year, featuring obituaries of women who didn't initially receive them, so it's literature, but it's also this larger project just in culture that we're seeing, which is really fascinating.

ER: Yeah, yeah. And that's a good point, and you know, you and I have talked about the fact that my main writing project right now is that I'm writing Piatt's first biography, and I'm very aware of the larger issues you and I have been discussing today, because I think a lot about my audience for a biography. And I think about some of these other biographies, for example, that are getting reviews in *The New York Times*, and what is it about these historical figures that speaks to people. So, people are not necessarily going to go out and read the poems and the fiction by Constance Fenimore Woolson, for example, who was a contemporary of Sarah Piatt's, but Norton published a biography of her, and it was reviewed on the first Arts page in *The New York Times*. So, people are just finding something interesting about the idea of the recovered woman, and there is an awful lot about Piatt's life in that respect that's very compelling to people, as in my example about "The Palace-Burner." So, I think that there are ways to tell the story of Piatt's life. She so often in her poems wrote directly about historical incidents of the day, cultural constructions of the day. And remember, she's living, you know, she lived in antebellum Kentucky, was the offspring of two slave-owning families. In 1861 moves to Washington D.C., where she spends the Civil War, right at the brink of the Confederacy. She lived in Ireland for 11 years at the height of the land wars. I mean, she saw stuff in her life. As Paula Bennett said in the edition *Palace-Burner*, you know, she had a borderland mentality, because she was—seemed constantly at the crux of these major conflicts, and she wrote about all of them. So, you know, to situate her with respect to these extremely interesting things that happened historically—cultural collisions in the United States during her lifetime—for example, over women's roles in society, people's relationships to the Christian churches. She was raised in Christian churches and had a lot of ambivalence about what she was taught. She records that in her poems. So, I think to tell the stories that people find interesting, and then to show them how that works through a poem. That's like a teaching approach, really. But it's also a way of showing people, even people who aren't necessarily readers of poetry, how and why poems can be interesting. So, I think the story of her life can bring people into some of the poems.

JB: So I think I'd like to talk a bit about archives and archival research and then circle back around to your biography project because I think we need to discuss that a little more as well. But first I want to talk about the collections we have at Ohio State. So, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, which is the special collections unit at The Ohio State University Libraries that focuses on collecting, preserving, and providing access to literary and historical materials—and it's the unit I work in—and has really been focusing on becoming a major repository for Sarah Piatt archival material and being a home for research for her. And to that end, we have the papers of, as you mentioned, Paula Bennett and Larry R. Michaels, and we have been working on acquiring original archival materials related to Sarah Piatt as well. So, you have been

instrumental in all of this. I know this precedes me, you had worked with my predecessor, Curator Geoff Smith. I'd love to hear you talk a bit about how that started and just a bit of context.

ER: Okay. And here I can't restrain myself from once again referring back to Herman Melville, [laughs] because I did so much work in those days, again, about how Herman Melville became great. And as a Melville scholar, I had to, to be a competent Melville scholar, I had to sort back through and understand all the scholarship. Okay, that was one of the expectations for scholars of my generation. And so I did that work, which meant I knew the inside of the Melville revival very well. So, one of the reasons that was great training for me, because at the time of course I couldn't have ever imagined that I would end up working on recovering Sarah Piatt and writing her biography, couldn't have imagined it. One of the reasons that was such great training, is because after I found myself electrified by Sarah Piatt's work, I understood the infrastructure behind an author becoming great. I knew that from being a Melville scholar. I understood that that does not happen unless you have infrastructure, because, again, it's not like everybody wakes up one day, and they're all like, "Oh my God, Sarah Piatt is great!" No. So I knew the whole inside of the Melville infrastructure, and so I got this idea. I was like, you know what, I know how that happened with Herman Melville, I can work on building the Piatt infrastructure. And that was how things started. The ball started rolling with my various collaborations with the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Ohio State. I was very committed to the idea of putting together projects that would build the infrastructure and through my experience with Melville scholarship, I really had a pretty clear idea of what they needed to look like. And one of my main jobs was to think of the Melville infrastructure and then recast it for the digital age, basically.

So, the story about how it started was that, remember I said I taught that first graduate seminar in the summer of 2000. And around that time, I was trying to build networks. This was not something that I ever imagined I should or would want to try to do as a solitary scholar. I immediately started building networks. So, was in touch with Paula Bennet, was in touch with Larry Michaels, got in touch with Margaret Piatt out in West Liberty, Ohio. Margaret Piatt, at the time, was running the Piatt Castles, two castles out in West Liberty, Ohio, a Piatt family property. But Margaret is extremely welcoming to Piatt scholars, and got in touch with her, that gave me a family connection. Margaret has her own archive out there at the Castles. So, I was just trying to build this network of people. And one of the people I also started working with on this was, as you mentioned, your predecessor, Geoff Smith. And Geoff Smith was absolutely instrumental to making this whole thing happen, because Geoff instantly recognized, first of all, that this was an important project: finding a new author with the status of a major author. But second of all, I talked about all the different places Piatt lived and so on, and how she was connected to all these important historical events, but her primary home with her husband, across their lives as a married couple, was in North Bend, Ohio. So even though she was born in Kentucky, there is arguably one way of talking about her as an Ohio poet. So, it also made a lot of sense for, you know, the major research university in Ohio to think of itself as a possible repository for Piatt's work. So, Geoff and I were very excited about doing this together early on, and then—I pulled this out of my own personal archive on my computer because I knew we

were talking today. There was a certain point where I just pulled together a couple of different funding sources and a couple of different people and ran a week of events at Ohio State called "Sarah Piatt Week." And I checked that, because *The Columbus Dispatch* featured an article about it. So, that was in late February and early March of 2001. So, you know I taught that class in the summer of 2000. By winter of 2001, I was running this event, it was in the *Dispatch*. Paula Bennett and Larry Michaels both came to campus and spoke to the general public and to my students and so on. But one of the things that started happening then was Geoff Smith from the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library was also able to begin talking with Paula Bennett about acquiring her papers. And it wasn't that long after that—and again, you know, all thanks to Geoff Smith for making this happen—Geoff sent library staff out to Carbondale, Illinois where Paula Bennett was a Professor at Southern Illinois University. Geoff's, you know, staff drove out there and collected Paula's papers and brought them back to the library when she donated them to us. So, acquiring Bennett's papers at that point in 2001, was the beginning of what we have since built into a much larger collection, as you know. We've acquired Larry Michaels's papers. Larry has given us extraordinarily valuable first printings and first editions of many of Piatt's works, and we are adding new elements to the Recovery Project all the time.

JB: A lot of your scholarship, and definitely the current biographical project you're working on, is based in archival research. But I think, if I'm remembering correctly, that you had mentioned earlier in your PhD program that wasn't necessarily a focus.

ER: Yes.

JB: So how did you come to this kind of work?

ER: Well, you know, this is a story I often tell my students, because I teach an archival research methods class to undergraduates and also for graduate students. And I know from my own experience, almost nobody gets actual hands-on training in how to do archival research. A lot of people, I mean, especially in, you know, in the humanities there's a lot of buzz around the concept of "the archive." Often people mean different things by it. Notice, I just used it in a singular form, "the archive," as if it's a thing, like a singular thing. So, there's a lot of buzz around that term, but practically speaking, very few people get training in how to do this. So, this is one of my missions as a teacher.

And the way it started for me was that when I was in graduate school, again, I got training in American social history. It was in my American social history class with Professor Ronald G. Walters that I learned about what it might look like to do an archival project. I learned it in that class, and specifically, we did a unit in that class on the history of the professions in America. The professions as a new phenomenon, basically, in Gilded Age America, where you no longer had only the so-called learned professions that people focused on before that of law, medicine, and the ministry, but you suddenly had, in Gilded Age America, all these new professions. And what I decided I wanted to do in that class—and I went and talked to Professor Ron Walters about it—was I said, "I want to learn how to do archival research in your class. Can you help me?" And he said, "I'd be glad to." And I said, "Okay, so what I want to do is, I want to work on

this history of professions thing, and because here we are at Johns Hopkins, I need a project I can do in the archives at Johns Hopkins. So, what I want to do is I want to write a history of the English department using the English department records here," because the thing about archives, you have to be there. You know, there was no internet then. [laughs] So, part of what happened was taking that class, I suddenly understood what it would mean to actually do archival research. I found a project that interested me, and I found a professor who was willing to supervise the research. So, that project, first of all, totally transformed my intellectual life, because, unlike a lot of people, I actually like that kind of work. I have a colleague who said to me one time, "You know, I liked the idea of doing archival work," he said. "But then I went to the archives at such and such a place and I was there for a week." And he said, "I realized I could not spend my days, long days, where the only human contact I had with anyone was to say, 'Could I please have Box 3, Folder 17'?" [laughs]

Okay, so it's a type of work you actually have to be suited for, which I am, for whatever strange reason. But, that project I wrote for Professor Walters became the germ of my second book, which is all archival research, about the history of higher education. And the thing that's so electrifying for me about archival research—and my students do learn this, I hear this on course evaluations—is that it shows you how deep you have to go into records to actually understand what lies behind things we might think about as facts. You know, like, you can Google something, you don't get knowledge, you get information. So, understanding what it means to actually go into records, what they are showing you, what they're hiding, what other questions you have to ask about them. It's its own type of work, and it's not for everybody, but it is for me; I really enjoy it. And of course, writing Sarah's first biography, there are biographical sketches of her and so on, that people published in the nineteenth century, when she was famous. But even those I have to second-guess—every single one of them. I have to fact check everything, because a certain amount of that is spin, right? So, it's a really investigative, kind of almost, it's like a detective quest. And I enjoy that type of work, and the biography is all about finding the sources. Where are they? Who's got letters? Does anyone have letters? You know, is there a— there's reputed to be a scrapbook somewhere that no one can find. I mean, like, it's all detective work. Where am I going to find the records that allow me to piece together the story of her life? The poems are one kind of record, but I need a lot of other things. And I spend a lot of my time looking for them.

JB: Well, actually, that leads me to a couple other questions about your project. Because I know we've talked a lot about one of the major challenges of working on Piatt is the limited amount of archival material. So, I'm curious what you think happened to her manuscripts and letters. Are they lost? Are they still out there? And I'm also very curious to know: if you're trained as a literary scholar, and you're entering a project where you're writing about a poet where there's no other major biographies, this sounds like to me such a potentially daunting project [laughs] to take on, and I'm wondering how you decided to do this and how you prepared for writing a biography, given that you've done so much writing and scholarship, but this is a new genre.

ER: Yes, absolutely. Well, first of all, I have to say I absolutely love working on the biography. I adore this research, I love it. And we're living in the pandemic, so I'm not in the archives this

summer, but luckily I have collected a lot of archival documents that I took pictures of and stored, and so I do spend very long, entire days, at my computer, staring at photographs I took at archives like at Yale University. I have my colleague's nightmare about, you know, Box 3, Folder 17, and I can live that in very long days and I find it absolutely fascinating. And this goes back to saying I enjoy a certain type of work that involves investigation and, really, detective work, because to do this kind of thing, you have to find it interesting that you're reading an account somewhere that just raises all kinds of questions, and that you can't accept, and you have to just figure out—well, where would I find that, okay? If I can't find this, where would I? All right, I'm going have to look at the tax records from Fayette County, Kentucky in 1840. I mean, I spent entire weeks this summer reading tax records from different counties in Kentucky. It's not for everybody. I enjoy it. But it was also a good time in my career for me to undertake this project. So, the timing was good. I published a book in the summer of 2018 about American poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century. And that was a certain type of scholarship, and it was a good time for me to make a break and do something different and write in a different style. There was a chapter about Piatt in that book as part of a larger argument about the importance of realism to American poets at that time. But I was very—it was very energizing to me to make a little bit of a genre change in terms of the kind of writing I was doing. So, it's a great time for this because I feel very mentally fresh with it.

So, one of the ways I prepared was, of course, just because I've been teaching Piatt for a long time now, and I'm very familiar with her poetic voice, and with the kinds of things she cares about in her poems. So, I had that whole sort of apparatus for plunging into more of the life and historical context. I'm able to put a lot of pieces together that I've been thinking about for a long time. So, there was a real fabric, a matrix for me to bring with me into doing the historical research.

Now, you raise the important issue of the fact that relative to other kinds of historical figures or writers, we could say there's a dearth of material. And one of the reasons for that, of course, might be because so few people have heard of her. So, when I talk to my students about this project, I'm always saying, you have to realize that, you know, again, what I said earlier, no writer is born great. Until a writer is identified as great, somehow, in a certain place and time, why would anyone have any reason to collect their stuff? You know, if you found a piece of paper now, a letter or something with Herman Melville's name on it, even people who haven't read Melville would be like, this is a famous guy, this might be worth something. There's no reason anyone should have saved any of Piatt's stuff, or they might have it in their attics. Or she might be some sort of distant relation of theirs, and they've got a box of family stuff. They don't know she's famous. So, this is one way of understanding why it's possible—we don't know, but it's possible—there is stuff out there that we just haven't found. Now, we also have historical documentation that the Piatts—Sarah and her husband J.J.—had various kinds of losses of boxes of things over the years. So, we do also have some evidence that things were lost. But, of course, that doesn't mean it was all lost. So, you know, manuscripts of Herman Melville's have turned up in the past several decades. So that can happen at any time, right? I mean, Melville's stuff was in a barn in upstate New York. So that can happen. Piatt stuff could be out there.

But, in the meantime, what I have to do is basically two things: work with the stuff that I know exists. So, there is this large collection at Yale called the Piatt Family Papers. Yale bought it, not because of Sarah Piatt—they'd never heard of her—but just because a book dealer was selling a large collection of family papers. These are papers that, if you read their description of the collection, are focused around the family of J.J.'s father, so Sarah's father-in-law, John Bear Piatt. And Yale did not keep a provenance file on it, they can't tell me why they bought it. But my guess is that they bought it just because it was an extensive collection of papers. They are very valuable above and beyond the fact that Sarah shows up in there, even though they didn't know who she was, because it's a really fascinating record of a family spreading out across the United States in Gilded Age America. But again, my thought was, okay, so they don't have any reason to know who Sarah Piatt is, but there's got to be stuff in there.

Paula Bennett had gone there years ago and had found some letters of J.J.'s and Sarah's in the collection. At that time there were no iPads for taking pictures, and Paula was doing her best to take notes, but she didn't have a lot of time there, either. So, I was going back in Paula's footsteps, thinking that I would put in the time to spend more time there than she had been able to. And so, yes, what I did was I had no idea how much stuff there would be, I had two weeks there. But, when I got into those boxes, I realized it was a gold mine, and I was not going to have time to read it in two weeks. But what I did do was take a picture, literally, of every page in those boxes. 2,000 pictures. And all kinds of stuff turns up in there related to Sarah and J.J. So, you see, that's what I mean about if it were Herman Melville, there would be a lot of drama about, we have all this Melville stuff. But no, that's not true with Sarah right now. So, I have another—

JB: Well, archives—

ER: I'm sorry?

JB: Archives are also essential to the recovery project.

ER: Oh, yes, yes, absolutely, because that's where there will be stuff, and I have to just be canny about figuring out where to look. Now, of course, our archives here at Ohio State are fantastic because we have this Sarah Piatt Recovery Project where we are collecting things, with, you know, under that umbrella, as a place where people can come to study Sarah Piatt. So, we're able to organize and present and make available to the public resources that are more hit or miss in other places where she might or might not even show up in the inventory for the collection.

JB: And that actually makes me think that perhaps we should make a distinction, that some of the materials, such as Paula's papers and Larry's papers and some of the materials we've recently acquired that are archival items related to Sarah Piatt herself, are not digitized. But you've mentioned the broader Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project, which is this vast digital project that is publicly available to everyone. And it's hosted by University Libraries and it's a site—I think we've mentioned this a little bit, but—it has her poems in the original

context. So, we see her poems in *The New York Ledger* and the Washington D.C. newspaper, *The Capital,* and then it also includes other resources such as oral histories with Piatt scholars, and this interview will be part of that as well. So, we talked a little bit about this, but I thought maybe you could give a bit more background. How did this come about, and maybe a bit more about how this fits into the larger project that you're talking about.

ER: Do you mean the whole recovery project or just the digital pieces?

JB: I was actually thinking about the larger recovery project.

ER: Okay, yes. So, we already talked about how when Paula Bennett came to campus in 2001, Geoff Smith and I started collaborating on building something, and that it began with Paula Bennett generously donating all her papers to us. So, that was the first piece. And we've built on it since then. And as you said—and this is important for people who are listening to this interview to understand—that archives offer a lot of different kinds of tools. And so, one really important thing about our Sarah Piatt materials here at Ohio State is that they offer students and scholars and readers a lot of different ways of encountering important information about Sarah. So, there are the physical materials. These are the things that you would have to go to the Ohio State University Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts Library to use. And, you know, these are things like boxes of papers or first printings of "The Palace-Burner," the poem in that issue of *The Independent*. I mean, Larry Michaels collected a lot of this kind of stuff, and it's there, you can go, you can look at the magazine, you can look at his research notes, you can look at Paula's research notes, we're collect[ing]—all these things are on paper and you have to go and engage them physically. So, that's one type of archival investigation. And going back to my point earlier about people looking things up on Google and how that is a very limited way of engaging information if you're trying to build knowledge. The information in the archives is very raw. I mean, you have to understand what you're looking at, and what is the context for understanding it.

So, we've built a physical collection like that. But we've also built these digital collections that people can look at from home. Or during the pandemic. They can't get to the library and the digital collections offer people the chance to—one particular thing about them I want to say is that, before Sarah became Sarah Piatt in 1861 when she married J.J., she was living in Kentucky, where she had been born, and she was already a famous poet, celebrity poet. The name she published under was Sallie Bryan, Sallie M. as in Morgan, Sarah Morgan Bryan. She went by Sallie, Sallie M. Bryan, B-R-Y-A-N. She was a famous poet. She was being published for a time weekly in *The New York Ledger*, which was one of the most famous publications of the age. Also being published in *The Louisville Daily Journal*, which was the most important—at that time it was considered a newspaper of the West. She was being published regularly in two of the most important publications of the age in her late teens and early 20s. So, she was really, really famous.

Now, Paula Bennett now says, and she has said this in print, that she feels that the biggest mistake she made as a Piatt scholar was classifying Sallie M. Bryan's poems as, the term she

used was "juvenilia," and she meant it in a derogatory sense at the time. She thought this—that that term is often used for the immature work of a writer who gets good later. And Paula says now, and again, has said it in print, she now thinks that was the biggest mistake she made, because she's on record saying that about the early poems and she now thinks they're great. But the point is, she left them all out of her edition. So that's, you know, something like 150 poems you're just not going to find there. They're not in Spengemann's edition, they're not in Paula's edition. But we have begun at Ohio State collecting those early poems, digitizing them as they appeared in their original publications, writing transcriptions—

JB: Do you remember what year that project started?

ER: Let's see, hmm, what year it started. I don't know, I would have to do some digging about that. Do you have in front of you? —I can look it up...

JB: Oh, that's okay. I was just wondering because it certainly predates me. It's been a project in the works for quite some time, I think.

ER: Yes. Now there is—I'm sorry, that's one of the dates I didn't think to look up before we were talking today. But the first part of that project was the website we did about *The Capital*, the Washington, D.C. newspaper that was managed and edited by J.J.'s cousin, Donn Piatt, of the Piatt Castles in West Liberty. At the time, he was in Washington, D.C., this was a famous kind of gadfly newspaper, and he frequently published Sarah's poems. Now, *that*—we launched *The Capital* site in 2016, and it took some years to get there. One of the reasons that came into being—and this is a valuable story about archives—is that Paula Bennett, again, her papers were at the center of the Piatt Recovery Project when we started it. But at a certain point, I went to Paula—[sound cuts out]

JB: We're recording again and there might have been a bit of a gap because my earbuds died, so we had to pause for a moment. So we're picking up where we left off. Elizabeth, you were telling us the story of digitizing *The Capital*, finding copies and getting them onto the Piatt Recovery Project.

ER: Yes, and one of the reasons that was one of our earliest projects was because I turned to Paula Bennett, as I have continued to do for guidance—of course, she was a first-wave Piatt scholar, I'm really a second-wave Piatt scholar—but I said to her, "Paula, for my next project, what do you think would be the most important thing to do?" And she said, "Get *The Capital.*" Now, the reason she said that is because her argument about poems in *The Capital* is that they were some of Sarah's most political poems, and that they were poems that often were not republished in book form. So, she saw this as an absolutely essential archive of Piatt's work. Now, one of the interesting things about that—and it goes back to, you know, what do you find in archives versus, maybe, what's available through a Google search—is that nobody had *The Capital*. Like, nobody had digitized it. You know, there were maybe scattered issues here or there, a couple at the Library of Congress, but nobody had a run of *The Capital*, not the Antiquarian S—just, you know, nobody.

So, the people who had seen *The Capital* were Larry Michaels and Paula, and where they had seen—this is how we knew they existed—we only knew the poems existed because both of them had seen them at the Piatt Castles in West Liberty, Ohio. They had both visited Margaret Piatt there, searching for Sarah, and Margaret had *The Capital*. So, I turned to Margaret and said, "You know, we'd like to digitize *The Capital* so it could be more generally available." And Margaret Piatt had all of them. She had all the copies, nobody else in the world has these, and she loaned them to us. I drove out there to the Piatt Castles, we loaded *The Capital* into my, at the time I was driving a Volvo station wagon, and in total paranoia—because that was a Friday, I couldn't deliver them to Rare Books until Monday morning—and in total paranoia, I had them under a million tarps in my house, you know, in case there could be a leak or something like that. And then Monday morning, I drove them up to the Library and then again, my colleagues at Ohio State digitized them. And now we have the full run, during Donn's tenure, and now those can be available to the public. So, that's a great story about archives and about what it means to find stuff that is not out there otherwise. Nobody's got those.

So, it began with *The Capital*. That was extremely important. Once that was done, we then turned to *The New York Ledger*, which, as I said, was a place where Sallie was a celebrity poet as a very young woman. She was, you know, 21, and they were marketing her. This was one of the primary sort of marketing blockbuster successes of this time period, Robert E. Bonner as the showman of *The New York Ledger*. And he advertised, you know, he had poems by Sallie M. Bryan. So, that was the next big digitization project. *The Capital* went live in 2016. *The Ledger* went live in 2019. And that was a project where a graduate student of mine, Ayendy Bonifacio, was absolutely instrumental to *The Ledger* project, undertook it with gusto and dedication, and that would not exist if it weren't for him.

JB: So, when you first started teaching Sarah Piatt 20 years ago, you were using the Penguin anthology.

ER: Yeah.

JB: And now you're able, I think, if I'm remembering correctly, you now have students actually look at *The Ledger* and *The Capital* online and use Larry's and Paula's materials when they come into special collections.

ER: Yes, exactly. And they—and they're very interested in this idea of how does an author become great. They love the idea, and you can see how this is another way that Sarah connects with the spirit of students today, undergraduates today. They love the idea that this is a woman who was lost to history and that we are reclaiming her voice. And she's connected with so many political issues from her time, complicated political issues, one of the most complicated being that she herself is the child of two slave-owning families. And, you know, we go into depth in those, about those histories in class. So, she's just touching on a lot of things that are very top of mind for our students today. And there's nothing simplistic about the way she handles the topics, so it works great for readers.

JB: I think that leads perfectly into the last question I have for you, which is, we've been talking about how you started working on Sarah Piatt decades ago, and that you're part of the second wave, so this has been going on for 30-something years, and I'd love to hear you say a little bit about what you've seen happen in that time, and what work you think is still left to be done.

ER: Do you mean what I've seen happen, specifically in Piatt studies?

JB: Yes.

ER: Okay. Well, I would say, what's happened in that time is we've gotten a, as I use the term, first wave of scholarly work accomplished. And scholarship does move in waves, it's like what I said earlier about infrastructure and about the history of Melville being recovered as a great author. Certain kinds of things have to be done first. We need the first wave scholars to do those, and then the second wave scholars can build on them. So, like I said, when I went to the Piatt Family Papers at Yale, I could see Paula's bookmarks in there. You know, I was building on what she did, but she had to do what she could accomplish as one person with a limited amount of time. And now, I, as a second-wave scholar, I build on what she did, and I expand upon it. One of the things that I think is different from the era when Melville was recovered is, that was really kind of a dog-eat-dog world in a lot of ways, among those scholars, very competitive. I think that a lot of what we've built in Piatt studies is extremely collaborative, which I love about it. I mean, like I said, building networks of people, asking different people to take on different kinds of work that they can contribute to a larger whole. I work with both undergraduates and with graduate students. I'm building a new digital project with a former undergraduate. We want to bring in as many people as we can. So I think in one way, kind of the temper of how scholarly projects are built has changed in a positive way. And that goes with, again, some of the current zeitgeist we have in our society about community-minded projects, rather than this more kind of competitive world you had in the Melville revival era, about, you know, who's going to find the stuff and keep it secret until they can get in print.

So, after the selected editions came out—again, we talked about Spengemann, Michaels, and Bennett—you get the work out there, and then there are questions about what comes next. So, out there in the world of nineteenth-century Americanist scholarship now a lot more people have heard of Piatt. They recognize the name in a way that they didn't back in the days when I was like, who is this person that everybody's making these great claims for? People have heard of her now. And the question for those who are not doing Piatt scholarship is, you know, what's going to become of her, what's going to happen next? She's still not in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. She was at one time. This is an interesting story. She made it into one edition of the *Norton* and then was cut in the very next one. But that's a function of the fact that fewer and fewer people are teaching poems now. So those are some of the things that have changed.

I think that one of the things we have to tackle now going forward, is that less and less in college classes, as well as in the kind of general sense of what is the importance of literature to

the general public, or to general readers, people aren't as concerned with what we used to call literary history. And by that, I mean roughly, you know, what's the list of greats, how does each one influence the next generation, how is Thoreau indebted to Emerson, these kinds of questions about literary trajectories. People are more interested now, I think, in how does art respond to and reflect culture, and how does it respond, how is it a possible lens through which we can understand our own moment. So, the frame for thinking about why an author is important has changed. It has changed over the course of my career, I've seen it. So that's one of the things that I would say has been a major influence on me in thinking about how to tell her story. I'm not so much concerned with these trajectories of influence, or let's say, traditional literary histories, but more about what is it that makes an author compelling in her own time, how is that connected to culture in her own time, and why should we read her now. So those are the questions that are really animating what I'm doing.

JB: So, before we close, I wanted to ask you if there's anything we didn't touch on that you wanted to discuss or if you have any final thoughts before we wrap up for today.

ER: Well, Jolie, you've come to some of my public talks and, you know there are certain things I always say. One of the things I always say is I will talk about Sarah Piatt anywhere, anytime. So, you know, you really kind of have to shut me down, or this is just going to keep going. [laughs] So I'll look at the clock and say thank you very much for talking to me for two hours about Sarah Piatt. And to anyone who might be listening, if you've read her already, you know that that voice is compelling. If you haven't read her already, I hope you will, and that you will help us to build the reader community that is bringing this woman's voice back into our current moment.

JB: This has just been wonderful, Elizabeth. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me again today.

ER: Thank you, Jolie.